MATHILDE ELIEL HOUSE

4122 SOUTH ELLIS AVENUE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks

September, 1989

MATHILDE ELIEL HOUSE
4122 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1866
Architects: Dankmar Adler and Louis H. Sullivan

Early in the history of their firm, Dankmar Adler and Louis H. Sullivan designed many small-scale residential buildings which were largely consistent with the prevalent contemporary stylistic tendancy toward the picturesque. Unlike their work on tall commercial buildings, where their respective genius in engineering and design was employed to singular effect, Adler and Sullivan created residential buildings that were generally familiar in plan and elevation, and that illustrated the extraordinary skill of the architects only in the form of the details that highlighted their interiors and exteriors. The architects' approach was no doubt in part determined by the social position of their clients, most of whom were members of the middle class South Side German-Jewish immigrant community, and by the desire of these individuals to aspire to established models of American affluence. In addition, however, their own interest may not have been focused on residential buildings as a type. The technological innovations, active debate over design theory, and previously unexplored questions of proportional relationships and stylistic treatments regarding the tall building may have presented a much greater challenge and warranted more extensive effort than the relatively traditional realm of load-bearing masonry wall residential design.

Nevertheless, during the 1880s small residential and commercial buildings made up the bulk of Adler and Sullivan's practice. Over half of the buildings they designed between 1883 and 1886, thirty-five of sixty-two completed commissions, were small houses or storefronts with residential apartments on upper floors. The number of buildings of these types designed by the firm decreased markedly, however, after they received the commission for the Auditorium Building in December, 1886. This event would change the scale and emphasis of their office, dramatically increasing the size of their operations and gaining for them the opportunity to turn their attention to much larger and more challenging projects. The prominence of the later works has overshadowed these early residences which have importance for illustrating the direction of and influences on the firm in its first years. The house at 4122 South Ellis Avenue is in many ways characteristic of these early residential designs.

A considerable number of the early residential buildings by Adler and Sullivan, including 4122 South Ellis, were commissioned by members of the extended family of Dankmar Adler, a family group that demonstrated a pattern of movement and activity common to a large number of the nineteenth century immigrants who settled in Chicago. Liebman Adler, Dankmar Adler's father, was born on January 8, 1812, in Stadt Lengsfeld, a German town in what was then the Grand Duchy of Saxe-Weimar. The youngest of eight children and the son of a rabbi, he began his studies of Hebrew and scripture with his father before going on to study at a preparatory school in Eisenach, at the Talmudic College in Frankfort-am-Oder, and at the Teachers' Seminary at Weimar. In September, 1843, he married twenty-two-year-old Sara Eliel, one of the many children of a leather tradesman from Nentershausen, a town in the Herzberg mountains. The birth of their son on July 3, 1844, was followed six days later by the death of the mother, and the child's given name of "Dankmar" was reputedly derived from the German words that mean "bitter thanks." Although Liebman remarried, to Zerlina Picard of Kassel in 1846, he was to maintain an active relationship with Sara Eliel's brothers and their families for the rest of his life.

Liebman's work as cantor, teacher, rabbi, and editor of the local Jewish newspaper, *Der Israelit*, made him one of the leading figures in his community. However, the stability of the Jewish community in Saxe-Weimar was undermined in the late 1840s with the introduction of new restrictions and taxes. Having no recourse to the restrictive regulations, they began to emigrate in increasing number. By 1852, four of Liebman's five surviving siblings had left Germany and Europe, one for South Africa and three for North America. The continued worsening of political conditions and the rapidly declining membership of his congregation led Liebman to follow the others' example and emigrate with his family in July, 1854, coming to the United States.

During a short stay with relatives in Cincinnati he made the connections that resulted in his taking the position of rabbi at Congregation Beth El in Detroit. The reputation Liebman developed, particularly in regard to education and in the introduction of moderate reforms to religious practice, led in 1861 to an invitation to come to Chicago to become rabbi of the much larger Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv, the "Congregation of the Men of the West." Commonly known by its initials, K.A.M. was founded in 1847, the first synagogue established west of the Allegheny Mountains. Liebman, who was hired to serve as teacher and school administrator as well as rabbi, was the first member of his extended family to settle in Chicago. He would serve K.A.M. until 1883, when at the age of seventy-one he went into semi-retirement and was given the title of rabbi emeritus. He continued to edit a Jewish newspaper, *The Deborah*, and published compilations of his sermons. In June, 1891, he was one of the speakers at the dedication of the new K.A.M. building at 33rd Street and Indiana Avenue (designated a Chicago Landmark in 1981), designed by his son's architectural firm. He died in January, 1892, at the age of eighty years.

Liebman Adler's presence apparently attracted the Eliel family to come to Chicago. It is not known when the many members of this family arrived in the United States; how-

ever, Gustav Eliel, his brother Louis, and a relative named Ludolph were the first to arrive in Chicago, sometime between early 1863 and early 1864. Gustav Eliel was born at Nentershausen in 1823, two years after his sister Sara. The first known accounts of his life appear in her letters to her betrothed Liebman, late in 1842 and early the following year. Sara's comments about him concern Gustav's work as a tanner, at one time working with someone of the surname Adler in Aschendorf, and later as he was preparing to transport leather goods to a trade fair in Braunschweiger. On their arrival in Chicago, Gustav and his brother Louis continued in the family trade and founded Eliel & Company, operating a tannery and dealing in hides and leathers. In 1868 the company added the subtitle "Chicago Tanning Works" to its name, and the next year saw expansion to include offices on LaSalle Street and a plant on the north branch of the river at Hawthorne Street. Their success attracted their brothers Herman, Jacob, and Jeremiah, and two others of undetermined relation, F.A. and Lambert Eliel, to settle in the city during 1866 and 1867. The five brothers, three relatives, and their families shared living quarters and working situations, either participating in the tanning business or in a dry goods store opened by Jacob in 1868.

With the help of their family, Gustav and Louis Eliel continued as proprietors of Eliel & Company, later Eliel, Danziger & Company, until they sold the operation in 1881. Gustav went on to spend the last nineteen years of his life as an insurance agent and broker. He and his wife Dorette, whom he met and married before emigrating to the United States, had seven children, two of whom died in infancy, and five, all daughters, who survived to adulthood: Mathilde, born in 1851; Minnie, born in 1855; Bertha, born in 1859; Sara, born in 1865, who became the wife of Daniel B. Nussbaum; and Eda, born in 1867 or 1868, who married Charles W. Holzheimer, the law partner of her uncle Levi A. Eliel. This large, closely knit family continued to grow with the emigration of more cousins from Germany and the addition of numerous new in-laws, and children.

Eleven of the thirty-five residential designs executed by Adler and Sullivan between 1883 and 1886 were commissioned by Eliel or Adler relatives, and at least seven others were built for family friends and members of the K.A.M. congregation. A partial list of these includes, in 1883, a house for Morris Selz, Alder's brother-in-law, and the neighboring residence for Anna McCormick of Peru, Illinois, which was occupied by Selz' business partner Charles Schwab; in 1884, a house for Eliel in-law Abraham Strauss, and another for his brother, Leopold Strauss; a residence built in 1885 for Alder's first cousin on his father's side, Abraham Kuh; and in 1886, houses for Eliel in-law Hugh Goodman and family friend Hannah Horner; a row of three houses at 3545, 3543, and 3541 South Ellis Avenue respectively for Adler family lawyer Eli B. Felsenthal, for Dankmar and Dila Adler, and for Dila's mother, Fanny Kohn; and houses for Levi A. Eliel at 3558 South Ellis and Mathilde Eliel at 4122 South Ellis. The majority of these buildings were two- or three-story attached single-family residences with basements, built of brick on twenty-five-foot city lots. Their facades were stylistically consistent with contemporary designs, incorporating elements of the Queen Anne and Richardsonian Romanesque with details by Sullivan. The house at 4122 South Ellis is exemplary of this type and is the only one of the above-listed buildings still standing.

The two-story brick facade of the Mathilde Eliel House was treated as a plane through which the window openings and the projection of the bay create variety and visual interest (Figure 1). The elevation of the first floor is dominated by a pair of round-headed arches of identical size, one of which forms the window of the front parlor and the second of which frames a recessed porch, the main entrance, and additional parlor windows. The second floor features an axially placed pressed metal bay topped with a tall pediment. The bay is supported on a wood bracket that rises between the first-floor arches and rests on a stone belt course (Figure 2). This bracket, the original pressed metal exposed at the pediment, the sash and window frames, and the coffers rendered in brick on the cornice frieze are original elements of the design (Figure 3). Each is a stock item; however, their particular arrangement emphasizes the flatness and malleability of the membrane that is the facade.

The exterior retains its original profile in spite of a number of alterations to its surfaces, most notably sandblasting, tuck-pointing, and the addition of aluminum siding covering the greater surface of the pressed metal bay. Interior examination of the bay indicates that the windows retain their original frames; there is no evidence of water damage that would have made new waterproofing necessary, and the original fabric is at least partially intact under the siding. The risers and landing of the front porch, originally built in wood, have been replaced with concrete in roughly the original configuration. The wooden porch roof, supported on wrought iron posts, is an addition that had no precedent in the facade design and now obscures the rhythm of the arches, compromising the emphasis on the plane of the facade.

The house is entered through a foyer that leads straight back to a sitting room. All of the formal and informal spaces of the house, its front parlor, the dining room, a pantry that connects with the kitchen, and the stairs to the second floor, radiate from this room. The sitting room and front parlor retain stock design fireplaces, parquet floors, and Sullivan-designed ceiling escutcheons in a pattern used in a number of the firm's houses of 1885 and 1886 (Figure 4). The entry to the pantry is the smallest doorway leading from the sitting room and, as a functional space separate from the more formal rooms, its arch is filled by a turned wood ceiling screen (Figure 5). The balusters of the stairway have a design that compliments but is not identical to the details of the pantry arch screen. The stairwell and second-floor hall are illuminated by a skylight in a common Victorian-era configuration. The master bedroom occupies the front of the second floor and was connected directly to a large dressing room. A bath and two smaller bedrooms complete the second-floor plan. The only significant change in the plan of the house is a small, one-story brick addition at the rear, built in 1911 to enlarge the kitchen. With few exceptions, the appointments throughout the house are quality stock materials typical of upper-middle-class residential buildings of the period.

The design of the Mathilde Eliel House shares many elements with others executed by Adler and Sullivan in 1885 and 1886, particularly the row of three houses built for Adler, for his mother-in-law Fanny Kohn, and for their family lawyer, Eli B. Felsenthal, on the

3500-block of South Ellis Avenue. The announcement of this rowhouse project in the March, 1886, issue of *The Building Budget, A Journal of Architecture* included an illustration that allows comparisons to be made between the designs of the various houses (Figure 6). The Kohn and Adler residences, at the left and center repectively in the illustration, share the same first-floor arches, recessed entry, porch configuration, and bracket-supported, axially placed bay used at the Mathilde Eliel House. The bays of the Eliel and Adler houses had the same shape, but the pressed metal of the Eliel bay was originally made to resemble wood shingles as was the bay on the Kohn residence. Although the rowhouses are one story taller than the Mathilde Eliel House, they all had similar rooflines and cornice treatments, with very little of Sullivan's distinctive ornament.

The only known published reference that connects the residence at 4122 South Ellis with the firm of Adler and Sullivan appeared in the October, 1886, issue of *The Building Budget:* "Adler and Sullivan . . . are also letting contracts for a residence for Gustav Eliel, on Ellis Avenue, between 40th and 41st streets. It will be two-story and cellar, pressed brick with stone trimmings, cost $5,000." Three issues are raised by this reference: a disparity between the description of the site as the 4000-block of Ellis and the actual location of the house one block further south; the use of Mathilde's father's name in connection with the commission; and the lack of other evidence to corroborate an attribution to Adler and Sullivan.

Confusion regarding the location of properties listed in the building journals, particularly in reference to locations beyond the city limits, was not uncommon in the 1880s. In this case, a thorough search of the property records indicates that no member of the Eliel family owned property on Ellis Avenue between 40th and 41st streets. The only Eliel-owned parcel south of 40th Street and north of 42nd on Ellis in the mid-1880s was at 4122. If the residence in *The Building Budget* reference was built, the location can be narrowed to this site and the discrepancy can be attributed to a reportorial or typographical error.

The property records indicate that Mathilde Eliel purchased the vacant lot at 4122 South Ellis, from Thomas Brown, Jr., a local speculator, on March 31, 1886. The city directory for 1887, compiled early that year, confirms that the building was complete, that Mathilde was living in it, and that, for the first and what would turn out to be the only period in her life, she was not living with her parents or other relatives. Her parents did join her at the 4122 address in 1888, but all three moved to Levi A. Eliel's Adler and Sullivan house at 3538 South Ellis in 1889, where they lived until each of them died.

An examination of Gustav's will and estate reveals that, except for the title he held to his plot in Rosehill Cemetery, he owned no real estate when he died in 1900. However, Mathilde's will, executed seven weeks before her death on November 24, 1904, specifically lists the property at 4122 South Ellis Avenue. After naming her youngest sister Eda Eliel Holzheimer as her executor, the second item in her will specified: "I give, devise, and bequeath to my beloved niece, Margaret Holzheimer, my house and lot known as

No. 4122 Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, absolutely and in fee simple." This was Mathilde's only real estate holding, and she had been using it as a rental income property since moving into her uncle's house in 1889. Mathilde's sister Sara Eliel Nussbaum and her husband had been the longest residents in the house, having occupied it in 1895 and staying until it passed out of the family in 1907. There are no legal documents extant that connect 4122 South Ellis with Gustav Eliel. Although his name appears in the reference in *The Building Budget*, it would have been common practice at the time for a father to handle such business matters as the commissioning of a house for his unwed daughter, even from a relative. The title was clearly held by Mathilde when the house was built, and her will makes it equally clear that she owned the house when she died eighteen years later. For these reasons, the house at 4122 South Ellis is referred to as the Mathilde Eliel House.

The last issue, regarding corroborative evidence of an attribution to Adler and Sullivan, has to depend on an examination of the circumstances and the design, as no other written documentation has been brought to light. The house at 4122 South Ellis was, according to public records, built for Mathilde Eliel, Dankmar Adler's cousin on his mother's side of the family. Since Adler and Sullivan executed designs for other Adler and Eliel relations in the months preceding and following the construction of this house, it would have been unusual for one member of a closely-knit family to go to an outside source for a design at that time. Many elements of the design, from the arches, the entrance recessed behind the arch, and the second-floor bay of the elevation, to the wood screen and the design of the ceiling escutcheons on the interior, are consistent with design elements found in previously documented Adler and Sullivan residences of this period. With no evidence to question the attribution, and with the support of the strongest possible circumstantial and physical evidence, the Mathilde Eliel House can be securely counted among the buildings designed by Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan.

One of the last small residential buildings designed by Adler and Sullivan before the expansion of their office due to the Auditorium Building commission, the Mathilde Eliel House is exemplary of the work that sustained the firm in its early years. It also represents the familial connections that Adler brought to the office which proved to be a major source of residential and subsequently commercial and industrial commissions for the partnership. Among the smallest and least ornate of the architects' residential designs, the house captures the qualities pervading all of these buildings and maintains them with a relatively high degree of integrity. Although it is not well known, the Mathilde Eliel House is one of the very few surviving buildings that shows the modest origins of what became a world-renowned design team.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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Staff for this publication

Timothy N. Wittman, research and writing
Janice Curtis, production assistance
John Hern, production assistance

Survey Documentation - 4th Ward

Elaine S. Batson
Raymond T. Tatum
Timothy N. Wittman

Figure 1: General view of the Mathilde Eliel House, 4122 South Ellis Avenue.

(Photograph by Raymond T. Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

4122

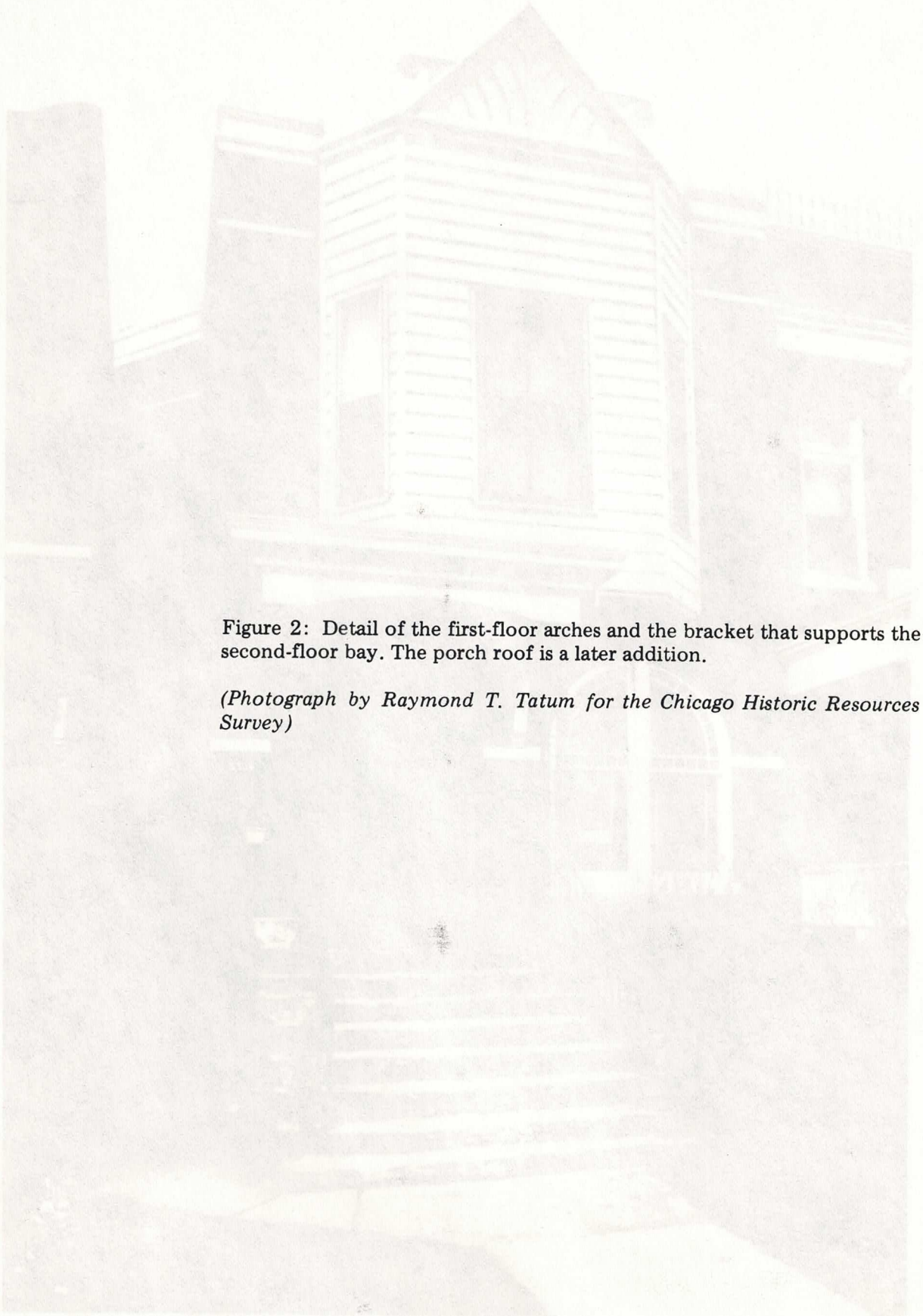

Figure 2: Detail of the first-floor arches and the bracket that supports the second-floor bay. The porch roof is a later addition.

(Photograph by Raymond T. Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

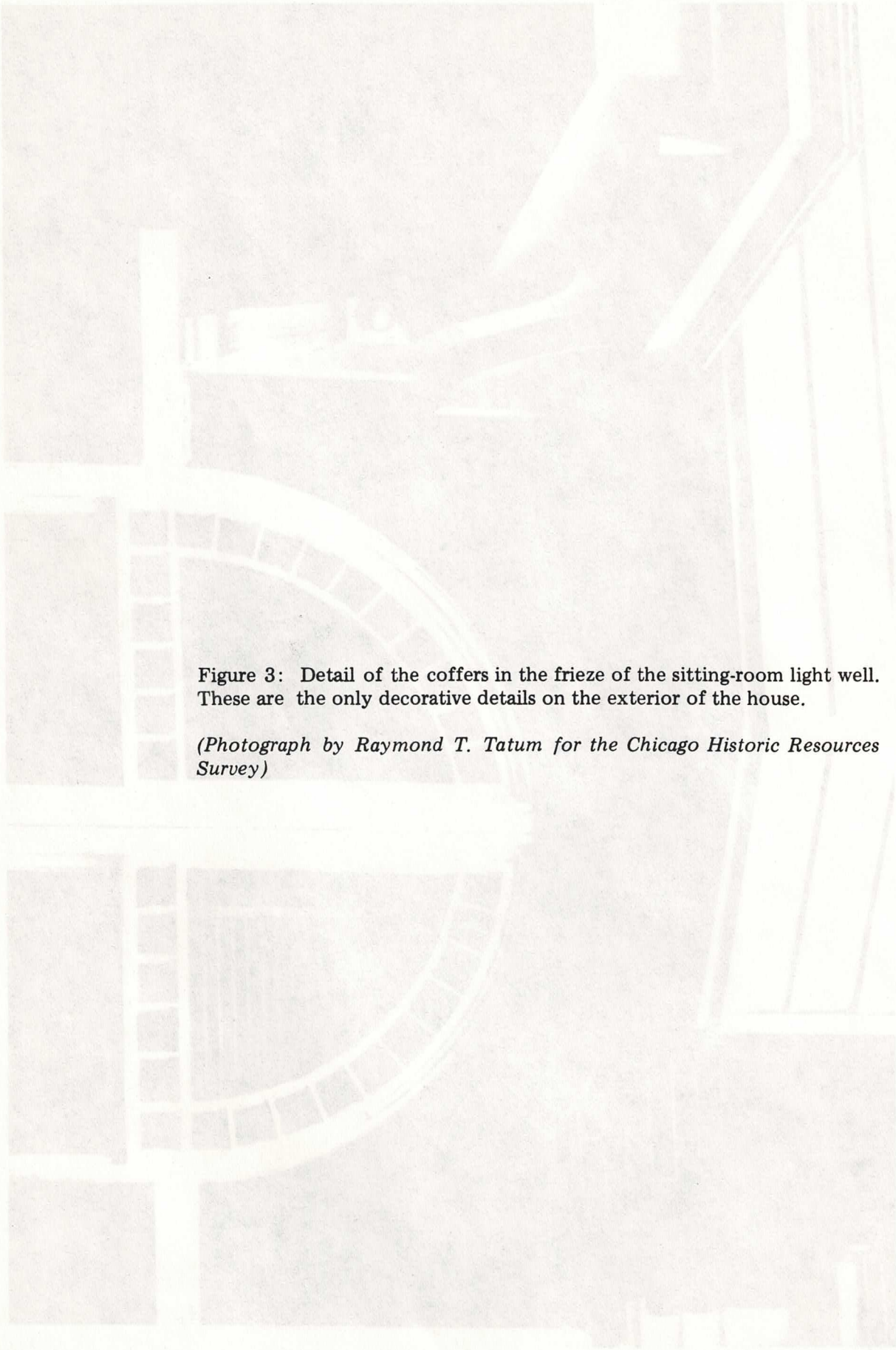

Figure 3: Detail of the coffers in the frieze of the sitting-room light well. These are the only decorative details on the exterior of the house.

(Photograph by Raymond T. Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

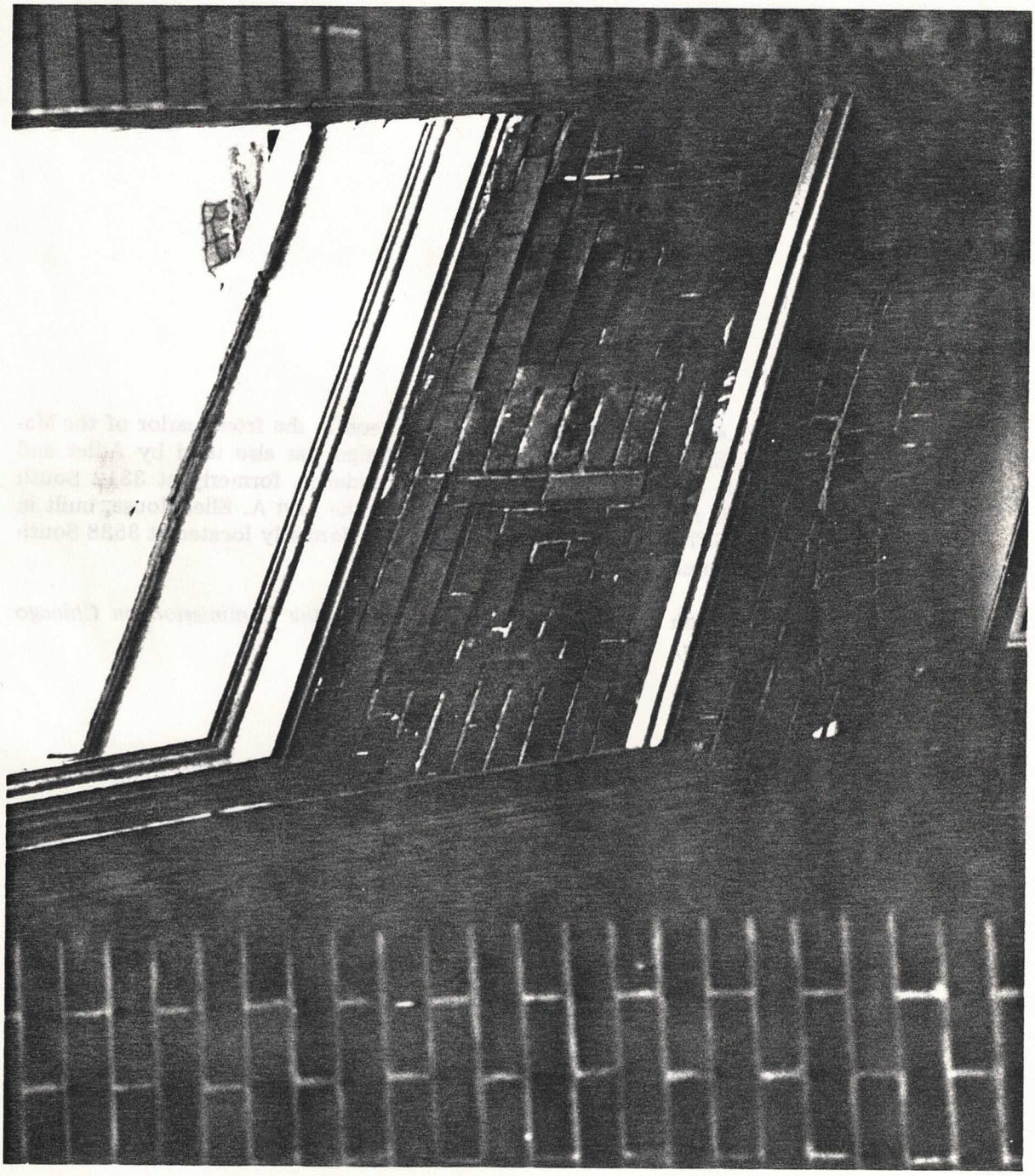

Figure 4: Detail of the ceiling escutcheon in the front parlor of the Mathilde Eliel House. This escutcheon design was also used by Adler and Sullivan in the Benjamin Lindauer Residence, formerly at 3312 South Wasbash Avenue, built in 1885, and in the Levi A. Eliel House, built in 1886-1887 for Mathilde's paternal uncle, formerly located at 3538 South Ellis Avenue.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

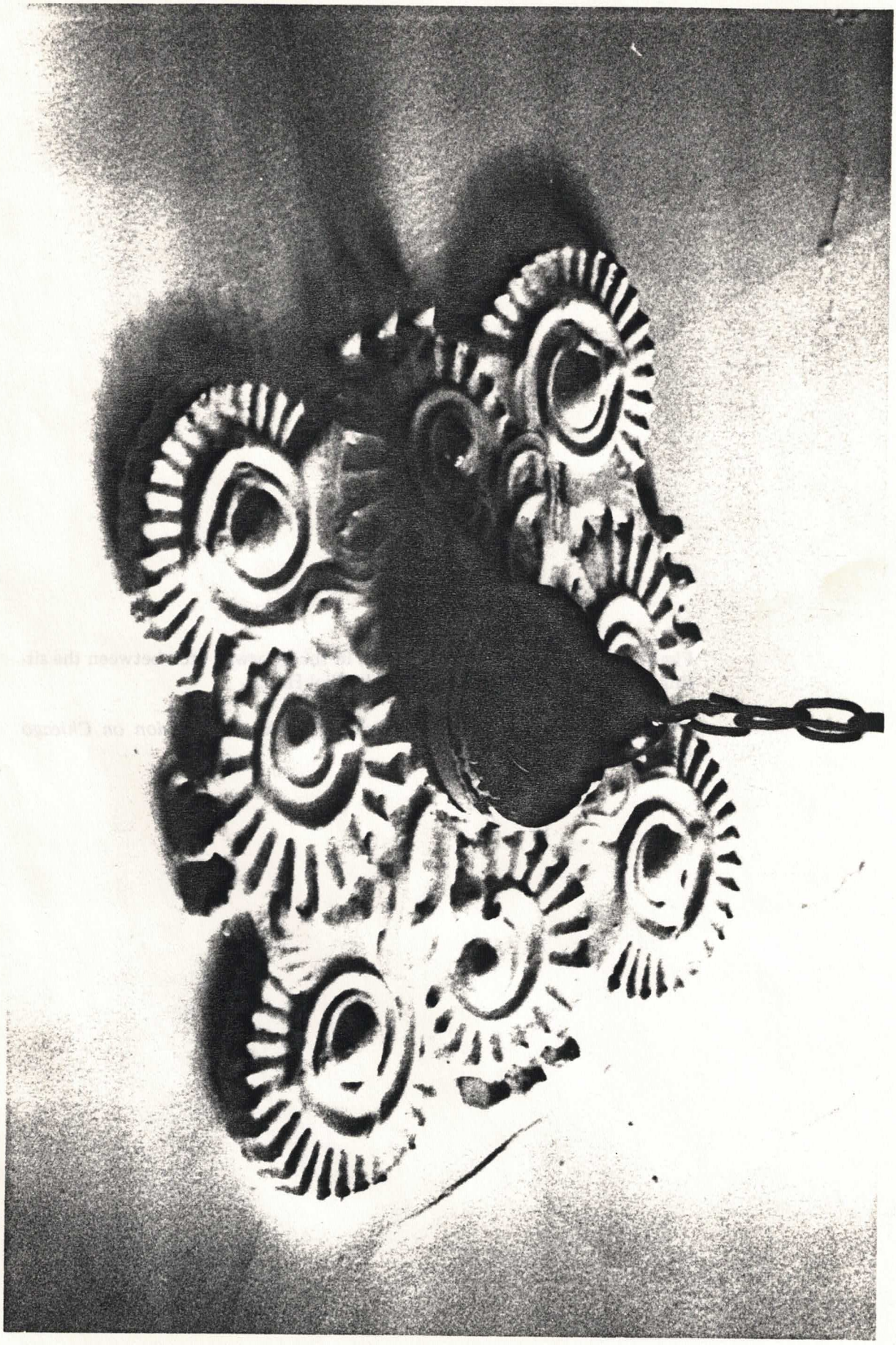

Figure 5: Detail of the ceiling screen in the doorway arch between the sitting room and pantry of the Mathilde Eliel House.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

Figure 6: A drawing of the residences for Fanny Kohn, Dankmar and Dila Adler and Eli B. Felsenthal at 3541, 3543, and 3545 South Ellis Avenue, designed by Adler and Sullivan early in 1886. This row was demolished in the process of urban renewal in the early 1960s.

(Reproduced from The Building Budget, A Journal of Architecture, *March, 1886)*

Adler & Sullivan
Architects

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312) 744-3200